Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History

Volume 6 | Issue 1 Article 7

4-2016

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The Death of Woman Wang by Jonathan D. Spence details the life of those living in provincial China during the 1600s. Spence focuses his writing on a particular northeastern county of China called T'an-ch'eng and uses both historical writings, like those of Feng K'o-ts'an (1673), a Chinese scholar of the day, as well as local stories by the writer P'u Sung-Ling (1640–1715), to illustrate this period in Chinese history. Poverty and peasant life are clear, overarching themes in the historical documents and stories Spence utilizes. A sense of despair and uncertainty for the future can also be examined in these writings, particularly from the beginning of the book, as Feng K'o-ts'an recalls nine catastrophes that struck T'an-ch'eng. *The Death of Woman Wang* provides a historical narrative on how hard life was for peasants and ordinary folk living during this turbulent transitional period.

The first chapter of *The Death of Woman Wang* details a series of catastrophes that swept through T'an-ch'eng in the 17th century. Earthquakes, floods, famine, and banditry were rampant at this time. Huang Liu-hung, a former magistrate at T'an-ch'eng, spoke of the disasters that plagued the area. In his memoir Huang wrote: "T'an-ch'eng is

only a tiny area, and it has long been destitute and ravaged. For thirty years now fields have lain under floodwater or weeds; we still cannot bear to speak of all the devastation. On top of this came the famine of 1665; and after the earthquake of 1668 not a single ear of grain was harvested…"(9). The population of T'an-ch'eng drastically declined from 200,000 people to roughly 60,000 in a matter fifty years. Throughout the 17th century bandits took advantage of the people of T'an-ch'eng. After any major flood, famine, or disaster, bandits were soon to follow. "One such Army, several thousand strong, moved down into T'an-ch'eng County from I-chou in April 1641" (5). During this time the Manchu invasion of China also began, and battles raged on across T'an-ch'eng and the area surrounding it. This decade of plight shaped the outlook of many people at T'an-ch'eng; as Huang stated of those living in the area, "they knew none of the joys of being alive" (14).

Natural disasters and violence brought about by instability were not the only hardships the people of T'an-ch'eng faced, as the everyday life of a peasant in late imperial China was difficult in its own right. Heavy taxation, corruption, and harsh social constructs affected most peasants in China. Corruption led to a tax system which stifled those who worked off the land. Theft and cheating was common in city markets, and the government was aware of this. In an effort to cut out the middleman, T'an-ch'eng tax collectors set up collecting points for the farmers. This solution, however, did not root out the corruption in the markets. In regards to the higher class landlords of the county, Huang notes, "the landlords use six major types of deception to lower their land tax assessments" (47). Some of these methods included hiring managers to run their land under assumed names, and pretending that their land was owned by families living in

other jurisdictions. Much of the tax burden was felt by peasant farmers and the corruption of the higher classes only suppressed the farmer's income to the point where they could no longer afford to pay the nine annual taxes forced upon them by the government.

One of the most central elements in *The Death of Woman Wang* is that of gender relations, and the tribulation of woman Wang provides excellent examples of how women were treated in imperial China. Spence writes that "In the written and collected memory of T'an-ch'eng as it was stored in the biographical sections of the *Local History*, the highest standard were demanded and claimed. This was even truer for women than for men" (99). Traditional Chinese culture dictates that the wife must be loyal to her husband, and thus, the story of woman Wang provides an example of an immoral woman. Woman Wang leaves her husband, Jen, for another man, and because of this, Jen kills her in her sleep. Strangely, the legal code of the time does have parameters in which vengeance can be taken upon a wife who committed adultery. Having a law such as this reflects how women were considered second-class citizens. Still, Jen is not allowed to savagely murder his wife without proof and he faces trial for his crime. It can be argued however that Jen's attempt to frame an innocent man, Kao, with his wife's murder, is a much larger crime than the murder itself. Other instances of marginalization for women in China can be observed through the foot binding of woman Wang, as well as earlier in the book when a husband bets his wife when gambling (82). Both of these examples show how women were seen as objects and property belonging to the man. In chapter five Spence mentions the biographies of *Honorable and Virtuous Women,* which provides virtuous examples for Chinese women to follow. "The virtues fostered were those of chastity, courage, tenacity, and unquestioning acceptance of prevailing hierarchy-unto

death if necessary" (100). It is the "unquestioning acceptance" that seems to have been the most important virtue for women in the eyes of a man. Thirteen women in the biographies were compelled to commit suicide out of loyalty to their deceased husbands. Huang even goes as far as to say that these suicides were "morally correct, as they showed a depth of the women's reference for her husband" (100).

The period encompassing 17th-century China is one of great turmoil. The transition from the Ming to the Qing Dynasty resulted in violence along the northern border where T'an-ch'eng is located. On top of this, multiple natural disasters struck T'an-ch'eng toward the end of the 17th century, and left many in the area uncertain for the future. However, though these disasters played a key role in shaping the general outlook of the people of T'an-ch'eng, the lives of peasants across the area were still difficult even when no disaster was looming. Tax burdens, government policies, and gender relations all played a part in the depressing state of T'an-ch'eng. Arguably, the most appalling aspect of this era in China, to a Western observer, is the treatment of women. Foot binding, encouraged suicides, and general social constructs that gave women fewer opportunities than men are all discussed in *The Death of Woman Wang.* Spence provides an unprecedented historical narrative of the lives of ordinary Chinese people and, through both historical records and folk stories, invokes the apparent hopelessness for many in late imperial China.

About the author

Ethan Marshall is a history major in his junior year at Armstrong. After graduating he hopes to achieve a Masters degree in either History or Foreign Affairs. Ethan is primarily interested in the study of medieval Europe, but also enjoys studying East Asian history and 19th Century Imperialism.

Reference

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